DCCUMENT RESUME

ED 049 708 HE 002 148

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TITLE The Remaking of American Education.
INSTITUTION American Associatcn for Higher Education, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 16 Mar 71
NOTE 6p.; Address presented at the 26th National Ccnference cn Higher Education, Chicago, Illinois, March 16, 1971

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *General Educatien, *Higher Education, *Problems, *Relevance (Education), *Responsibility

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the nature of the crises in the college classroom. An identity crisis affects virtually all Americans in one way or another, but especially the college student. This crisis reflects not only an increasing awareness of the social ills affecting society, but also a growing concern about the quality of life in an affluent society. A parallel crisis exists among the educational institutions themselves, as they are faced with a transformation from mass education to universal education and with demands for knowledge more relevant to human needs. To face these problems, colleges and universities must return to their basic responsibility: the education of individuals who in turn can educate those close to them. In effect it means giving students a liberal education and preparing them to educate others. It does not mean a classical or other single curriculum, but curricula that have coherence and purpose and that reflect some conviction about what is worth knowing, doing, and being. (AF)

ED049708

Second General Session
Tuesday Evening, March 16

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THE REMAKING OF AMERICAN EDUCATION*

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FORTUNE Magazine

The most useful point of departure for my talk this evening is the theme of this conference itself: "The New Decade: Who Counts? What Counts?" These two questions were answered some 350 years ago by the great Moravian educator, John Amos Comenius, in his introduction to The Great Didactic. "The education I propose includes all that is proper for a man," he wrote, "and is one in which all men who are born into this world should share....Our first wish is that all men should be educated fully to full humanity; not only one individual, nor a few, nor even many, but all men together and single, young and old, rich and poor, of high and lowly birth, men and women--in a word, all whose fate it is to be born human beings; so that at last the whole of the human race may become educated, men of all ages, all conditions, both sexes and all nations. Our second wish is that every man should be wholly educated, rightly formed not only in one single matter or in a few or even in many, but in all things which perfect human nature."

We will have to come much closer to Comenius' answer than we have so far if we are to survive the decade as a society in which we can take pride and comfort--if we are, that is to say, to become a truly just and humane society. Ours is, after all, an age of crisis--of multiple crises which are both important and urgent, and which are no less real for being frequent. The crisis in the classroom--the public school classroom, the college classroom, the national "classroom" created by the mass media and by the operation of the American political system--is both a reflection of and a contributor to the larger crisis of American society. I would like to concentrate tonight on the nature of the crisis in the college classroom and the directions in which solutions may lie.

First, the nature of the crisis--more precisely, the crises, since there are several affecting American colleges and universities.

There is, firstly, the "identity crisis" affecting virtually all Americans in one way or another, but the college students (or rather a significant minority among them) more than the rest of us. This identity crisis involves a malaise and anxiety that has become a characteristic of American culture. In part, this anxiety grows out of a change in perception--a belated recognition of and long overdue sensitivity to social ills that should have troubled us all along. Here, the mass media have played a major role in forcing poverty, racism, and bloodshed over the threshold of our awareness; we are the first nation in history to watch a war in the comfort of our bedroom or living room.

But the new consensus of anxiety also grows out of a new and growing concern with the quality of life--a belated discovery that affluence leaves some old problems unsolved and creates a number of new ones. Economic growth reduces poverty but also creates congestion, noise, and pollution of the environment.

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*Address presented at the Second General Session of the 26th National Conference on Higher Education, sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education, Chicago, Tuesday evening, March 16, 1971. Rights to reprint or to quote are restricted.

Technological change widens the individual's range of choice and makes economic growth possible; it also dislocates workers from their jobs and their neighborhoods. Affluence plus new technology frees men from slavery to the struggle for existence, from the brutalizing labor and subservience to nature that has been man's condition since Adam; it thereby forces them to confront the questions of life's meaning and purpose even while it destroys the faith that once provided answers.

It is not only affluence that poses problems or causes anxiety. The enormous widening of choice that contemporary society makes possible also appears as a mixed blessing, enhancing our sense of individuality but contributing to the pervasive uneasiness. In the past, men inherited their occupations, their status, and their life style; their wives were selected for them; and their struggle to survive gave them little time to question anything. Today, by contrast, men are presented with a bewildering range of options; they are forced to choose their occupations, jobs, places to live, marital partners, number of children, religion, political allegiance and affiliation, friendships, allocation of income, and life style. This widening of the range of choice and enhancement of individuality have had the effect of reducing the authority of tradition, which in turn requires still more choices to be exercised.

The burden is heavy. The choices are frightening, for they require the individual, perhaps for the first time in history, to choose, and in a sense to create, his own identity. The young rebels understand this well, even though their rhetoric obscures it; their actions make it clear that it is the burden of choice that torments or frightens them, and that many try to postpone for as long as possible. They understand that the choice of a career involves far more than a choice of how to earn a livelihood. They understand, viscerally if not intellectually, that the question, "What shall I do?", really means "What shall I do with myself?" And that means asking, "Who am I?", "What do I want to be or to become?" "What values do I want to serve?" "To whom, and to what, do I want to become responsible?" These are existential questions; that the students' answers frequently are irrelevant or naive is less important than the fact that they are confronting--and forcing us to confront--the fundamental questions of value and purpose. The students about whom I am talking enter college with the expectation that a college education will help them answer these fundamental, existential questions; a piece of the crisis in higher education is that so many of them are so quickly disillusioned, that so many come to conclude that the university offers no answers. The result is a frightening rejection of the authority of learning and of culture; reacting against the Academy's exaltation of the antiseptic mind and its lack of concern for feeling, for human relationships, they swing to the other extreme. Hence the newly fashionable anti-intellectualism of the intellectuals--the insistence that systematic and disciplined intellectual effort is a waste of time, and the accompanying worship of uninhibited sensation that forms the central theme of Charles Reich's The Greening of America.

This identity crisis among the students is matched by a parallel identity crisis among the institutions that educate them. What my friend and colleague, Martin Trow of Berkeley, calls the transformation of a system of mass higher education into one of universal higher education is compounding the problem colleges and universities have been facing since the early postwar period, when the shift from the traditional elitist system to mass higher education became pronounced. In different form, it is the problem that, earlier in the century, confronted, and in large measure overwhelmed, the high schools: in the phrase of another friend and colleague, Lawrence Cremin of Teachers College, how to humanize or popularize knowledge without vulgarizing it--how to "resynthesize and reorder" knowledge so

as to make it teachable to the mass of men, not just the few who, in the past, had a monopoly on what, for want of a better phrase, we call culture. We have not done a satisfactory job of humanizing knowledge, at least in part because academicians have not given this task the priority it deserves; the Academy awards far more Brownie points for educating graduate students than for educating raw, untutored freshmen. We must pay heed to Mathew Arnold's reminder, in CULTURE AND ANARCHY, that "The great men of culture are those who have a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to another, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time; who have laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional,exclusive; to humanize it, to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned, yet still remaining the best knowledge and thought of the time...."

Higher education needs to rediscover its sense of purpose. It will not be easy to do so, for we are just coming out of a twenty-year vacation from serious thought about educational purpose. As Wayne C. Booth has written, "There is something irrational in our contemporary neglect of systematic thought about educational goals." The irrationality is all the greater in view of the fact that any curriculum involves judgments about goals and values and the priorities attached to them. But those judgments tend to be unconscious. The tendency to think about thinking, which is one of the characteristics of the scholar, as Professor Joseph Schwab writes, is "notably uncommon and invisible in the one place which matters most to the collegiate community--its curriculum. As far as students are allowed to see," Professor Schwab continues, "the curriculum is not a subject of thought; it merely is. In many cases, indeed, thought about the curriculum is not merely invisible; it barely occurs."

I can attest personally to Schwab's harsh judgment. In traveling around the country, we made it a practice of asking deans, provosts, and presidents why it mattered that a student attended their institution rather than some other. In what ways were their graduates different from graduates of other institutions? How had attending their college or university affected their students?

The usual answer was a blank stare, a long pause, and either an expression of puzzlement, a confession that this was an interesting question that had not come up before, or a stammered attempt to suggest an answer that would better have been left unsaid. And yet it seems self-evident that this question ought automatically to be the starting point of any educational program. Plato argued its centrality some 2,400 years ago, with particular charm in the Protagoras. Remember the theme: Socrates' young friend, hearing that the great orator is in town and is accepting pupils, is rushing off to enroll. Socrates stops him and asks him how the studies he is about to undertake will affect him--what kind of human being his education will make him--for education, as Socrates reminds him, "is about the proper way to live."

All is not hopeless. The word "crisis," after all, has a double meaning. In its most common usage, it means that things are pretty bad. But if one looks at the etymology of the word, "crisis" signifies a turning point, that moment in time when a choice can be made. I have used the term in both senses in the title of my book--hence the subtitle, "The Remaking of American Education." And my antennae tell me that we are at a turning point.

What, then, should be done?

The starting point, perhaps, is to recognize that no college or university can turn out educated men and women--but that every college can turn out educators, which is to say, men and women who are capable of educating their wives or husbands, their children, their friends and colleagues--and themselves. This, after all, is what liberal education is all about--what it has always been all about.

It is also what education at the primary and secondary level is--more precisely, should be--all about. What distinguished education at the college level from that which precedes it is not simply its greater complexity and intensity, but its greater self-consciousness as well. To be educated to the point where one can educate himself, or others, means not only to think seriously about the means and ends of education but about the consequences of education as well--about the way education shapes and molds the people being educated.

This in turn means that to be educated--to be an educator--is to understand something of how to make one's education effective in the real world. It means to know something of how to apply knowledge to the life one lives and the society in which one lives it--in a word, to know what is relevant--and how to make knowledge relevant, which is to say, effective. The aim of education, as Alfred North Whitehead defined it, "is the acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge." "A merely well-informed man," Whitehead added, "is the most useless bore on God's earth."

The most direct and immediate way of finding out what it is that one really knows and how it can be applied--the most direct way of finding the purpose and testing the human relevance of what one has learned--is to teach it to someone else. In this sense, teaching is the ultimate liberal art, and some experience with teaching of one sort or another ought to be a part of every student's education. While one cannot be an educator without having received a liberal education, the converse is also true--one cannot be liberally educated without becoming an educator--of others, as well as of oneself. For if one cannot teach a subject to others without really knowing it, neither does he really know it unless he can teach it, i.e., communicate it, to others. (There is nothing new, I should add, in the notion that the educated man should take responsibility for making himself understood; in classical antiquity, as Warner Jaeger points out, rhetoric was the point from which education began, and the idea continued in the medieval university.)

In addition to teaching itself, the study of education should also be put where it belongs: at the heart of the liberal arts curriculum, not at its margins. For the study of education is the study of almost every question of importance in philosophy, history, and sociology. Our concept of education, after all, reflects our concept of the good man, the good life, and the good society; and there can be no concept of the good life or the good society apart from a concept of the kind of education needed to sustain it.

To do all this would be to return the college or the university to its most authentic tradition: that the education of educators--lawyer-educators, doctor-educators, businessman-educators, as well as teacher-educators--is the central responsibility of colleges and universities.

Let me emphasize however, (or to coin a phrase, let me make one thing perfectly clear) that to argue that all students should be liberally educated, and that to be liberally educated is to be prepared to teach, is in no way to suggest that all students receive a classical education. Those who mourn the decline of classical

studies and see in it the triumph of grubby materialism misunderstand the history of the university. When the classics remained supreme in higher education, it was not because of any inherent superiority--not because they formed the mind or shaped the character more successfully than other studies--but because they were vocationally useful. Two hundred years ago, for example, none would have argued that teaching Latin taught anything but Latin; one studied it because it was the communications medium of educated men. It was not until Latin lost this role that its other virtues were suddenly discovered.

It should be clear that there is, and can be, no one curriculum suitable for all time, or for all students at a given time. As Whitehead wrote, "The evocation of curiosity, of judgment, of the power of mastering a tangled set of circumstances, the use of theory in giving foresight in special cases--all these powers are not to be imparted by a set rule embodied in one set of examination subjects." To insist that there is only one curriculum is to confuse the means of education with the end. There are, in fact, many routes to a liberal education--as many routes, perhaps, as there are students. Certainly it is time we heeded Plato's maxim that the teacher must start where his students are at if he is to take them someplace else--and where this generation of students is at is with a good deal more freedom, and a good many fewer requirements, than our generation.

To suggest that there are many routes to a liberal education is not--

--let me emphasize the not -- is not to suggest that colleges do no more than offer a cafeteria of courses. There is an important, perhaps critical, difference between an individual course or set of courses that is liberal and liberalizing, and an education that is liberal and liberalizing. An education, and a curriculum, involve more than just a set of courses taken at random; if liberal education is to be more than just an occasional happy by-product, there must be some conception of what education is about and for.

Thus, the popular substitute for general education or other required courses -- distribution requirements -- is no more than a cop-out, an attempt to resolve fundamental questions of educational philosophy through inter-departmental horse-trading. Nor is the abolition of any requirements a solution in itself. If students are simply turned loose to "do their own thing", as Harris Wofford, president of Bryn Mawr College, has written, the college is not likely to be free to do its thing -- or to have a thing to do. "It is a liberal education we must expound," Wofford argues, "and this means a college with a curriculum with a view of what liberal education is, with something to say about how to get it; a college that respects its students enough to assume that they are ready to listen, and that they will respond. It is the cluttered and empty colleges, with nothing to say, that diminish the dialogue", the dialogue that lies at the heart of liberal education.

What is crucial is the dialogue. To suggest that a college must have something to say is not to imply that there must be only one curriculum; it is to argue that whatever curricula -- whatever routes to a liberal education -- a college offers, each of them must have coherence and purpose, each must reflect some conviction about what is worth knowing and doing and being. Students are not likely to be able to learn how to choose, how to decide for themselves between the better and the worse, if their teachers convey the notion that the choices do not matter. What made undergraduate education so exciting at Columbia in the 1930's and 40's, when I attended (and at Chicago in the same period) was not that either school had defined liberal education "correctly" either for that period or for all time, but that they had conceptions that shaped the students' -- and the faculties' -- lives outside the classroom as well as in. The conception was not one that every faculty member or every student shared; much of the excitement, in fact, stemmed fro the faculty members' and students' disagreements over what should be studied. What the faculty did share, however, is critical to liberal education: a concern for the possibilities and character of education, a conviction that the shape and content of the curriculum really matters, that some kinds and sequences of courses are better than others, and that the curriculum, consequently, should be shaped by educational conviction rather than by administrative convenience.

Let me conclude by simply quoting from Horace Mann's valedictory report to the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1848. "To all doubters, disbelievers, or despairers in human progress," he argued, "there is one experiment which has never yet been tried. . . . . Education has never been brought to bear with one-hundredth part of its potential force upon the natures of students, and through them, upon the character of men, and of the human race." It is about time that we tried.